SOC 7.01.2 The People and the Power

P - Kaiser, Robert G.

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Books of The Times

Windows on Russia—I

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE RUSSIANS. By Hedrick Smith. 527 pages. Quadrangle. $12.50.

RUSSIA. The People and the Power. By Robert G. Kaiser. 499 pages. Atheneum. $12.95.

Russia inhabits our fantasy life. Perhaps because Russia is "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," as Winston Churchill put it, our image of this country tends to melt into a paranoid dream—a "they-system" necessary to believe in a "we-system," as Thomas Pynchon described cultural paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"—the ultimate source of evil or the absolute definition of good, which is simply two ways of saying the same thing. Now, more than ever—what with the United States unsure of its international role in the wake of Vietnam, and what with the judiciousness of détente increasingly being debated (not to speak of the matters of Angola and grain and ice hockey)—Russia seems grist for our fantasy mills. That is why it is especially useful to have available at this moment these books about Russia by Hedrick Smith, now deputy national editor of The New York Times, and Robert G. Kaiser, now on the national staff of The Washington Post, based on their experiences in the Soviet Union from 1971 to 1974 as Moscow bureau chiefs for their respective newspapers.

Jill Krementz

Hedrick Smith

Antidotes to Fantasizing

Both Mr. Smith's "The Russians" and Mr. Kaiser's "Russia: The People and the Power" are antidotes to fantasizing. Both are written out of contact with the Russian people far more intimate than the minions of the K.G.B. would dream it was possible for foreigners to experience. Both are rich in the varied texture and feel of Russian life (by Russian I mean, as do both authors, not only the Russian Republic but also the other 14 republics that make up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Both keep you so fascinated pondering the contradictions, anomalies and absurdities of contemporary Russia that it becomes impossible to dream of Russia as a monolithic "they-system" contrived by a vengeful God to scourge the American conscience. Moreover, both address, either implicitly or explicitly, the question of Russia's challenge to future world order.

Obviously, the two books converge at any number of points. They make use of many common anecdotes. They tell many of the same jokes. They employ identical illustrative material: a single schematic diagram, comparing the dynamics of Russian and American society, which was described to them by an engineer named Mikhail Agorski. They describe the same dramatic encounter with Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. Each of them even appears in the other's book. (Not only were they exact contemporaries as Moscow bureau chiefs, but they were working colleagues and companions; and they happen to have been the two American correspondents that Mr. Solzhenitsyn selected to receive the first interview he gave to Western journalists—which led to an adventure that makes for one of the high points in each of their books.) But the two books also differ significantly—in personality, technique, and objective—which is why the two of them will be discussed separately in the balance of today's column and in tomorrow's.

A recipient of a 1974 Pulitzer Prize for his Moscow coverage, Hedrick Smith is no longer after the big story in "The Russians"—the workings of "high politics, the anatomy of the Soviet economy, the Communist Party structure, or the maneuverings of diplomacy." Instead he is trying "to convey . . . the human quotient, the texture and fabric of the personal lives of the Russians as people." And so he divides his canvas into three sections ("The People," "The System," and "Issues"), selects a series of subjects appropriate to each, and more or less wings it—freely associating his personal experiences with the system (he and his wife put their six children into Russian schools and tried to taste the life of the average citizen), his encounters with people who made an impression on him, and his insights into the character of contemporary Russia.

Lack of Demonstrativeness

For instance, Chapter IV, "Private Lives: Russians as People," begins with a memory of Zhenya Pasternak, the widow of the Nobel Prize-winning writer, then moves on to a screening of the American film "Dr. Zhivago" that Mr. Smith arranged for Pasternak's family. This brings up the viewers' amused response to the lack of demonstrativeness with which the Zhivago family reunites in one scene of the movie. Which in turn raises the subject of the Russians' warmth and deep belief in family and friendship. And slowly we come to understand the paradox of public and private behavior in Russia—the key to the people's public coldness and private warmth—not to mention the absurdity of the notion of an emerging New Soviet Man.

The result of this accretion of detail is not only highly entertaining and readable, but instructive as well—instructive on the subject of the Russians' Latin temperament (for the first time I understood clearly why Thomas Mann made his exemplar of sensual passion, Clavdia Chauchat, a Slav instead of a Spaniard); instructive on the subject of women in Russia (why they are liberated but far from emancipated); instructive on the status of Jews (Mr. Smith illustrates his discussion of assimilation with a report of Russian United Nations officials going to have their babies delivered at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and then asking to have circumcisions performed . . . on the eighth day).

And by degrees, though Mr. Smith is not after the big story, we begin to glimpse a big picture—a picture of what makes the Soviet Union tick in these days of post-Stalinist repression, a picture of what is likely to happen in the future ("Are they becoming more like us?"), a picture, in short, of Russian fantasies. But more on that subject tomorrow.